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Experimental Family Organization: An Historico-Cultural Report on The Oneida Community*

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NOT LONG ago the writer had the interesting experience of talking with a woman whose father had been born in the George Washington-Thomas Jefferson period. The woman is a daughter of John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community. Although a number of non-monogamous forms of family organization have appeared on the American scene—e.g., polygyny (the Mormons), celibacy (the Shakers, the Father Divine Movement)—the most radical form remains the group marriage experiment of the Oneida Community.

Subsequent to some correspondence, the President of Oneida, Ltd., invited the writer to spend some time at the site of the Old Community. During the visit, there was opportunity to interview a number of people, including officers of the company, local historians, and persons whose parents had been members of the Oneida group. In addition, the Mansion House Library was opened, which made it possible to examine the unique collection of newspapers, journals, and books formerly published by John Humphrey Noyes and his followers.

Finally, it was the writer's privilege to interview several of the *surviving members* of the Oneida Community. As of the time of the interviews, thirteen members were still living, and while they are all in their 80's and 90's, their minds are sharp, their memories remarkably clear. And when it is remembered that their former leader, Noyes, was living during the time when John Adams, Paul Revere, Thomas Jefferson, and other Revolutionary figures were alive, one cannot help but feel the vital continuum of American history. At any rate, the writer was not only graciously received but was able to compile some significant material, the bulk of which has not heretofore appeared in the literature.

By way of background, it should be mentioned that the Community was founded in

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1848 on the old Indian lands along the Oneida Creek in central New York State. John Humphrey Noyes, founder and long-time leader of the group, was a graduate of Yale Theological Seminary, although his theological views and Perfectionist philosophy had proved too heretical for the people of Putney, Vermont, where he had been preaching. Noyes' theology revolved around spiritual equality which, as he interpreted it, included both the economic and sexual spheres. In the Kingdom of God, all persons were to love and to share equally—a so-called Bible communism. Noyes gained some adherents, and in Putney the little group of Perfectionists actually started to practice what they preached. Predictably, however, there was little future for the group in an area that had been close to the heart of Puritanism, and Noyes and his followers were eventually run out of town.

Reassembling at Oneida, New York, they constructed a large Community Mansion House, and by expanding their efforts were able to increase the size of the group to several hundred members. And for many decades the Oneida Community sustained one of the most unusual social experiments the world has ever seen. Economic communism, group marriage, scientific breeding, sexual equality—it couldn't happen here, but it did! Indeed, the Community flourished until around 1880, after which a business enterprise (Oneida, Ltd.) was set up and the stock apportioned among the members. It is hoped that the following remarks will shed some light on this very remarkable historico-cultural episode, one which—for some reason—has been neglected by both historians and sociologists.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND FAMILY FUNCTIONS

What was there, in the elements of social organization, which successfully held the Community together in the face of both internal problems and external pressures? To begin with, much of the communality of action derived from the fact that the entire membership was

housed under one roof. The original communal home was built in 1849, but because of the increase in members it was replaced in 1862 by a spacious brick building known as the Mansion House. In subsequent years, wings were added as needed. The building still stands, in its entirety; in fact, during my visit to Oneida, I stayed at the Mansion House and can attest to the fact that it is a striking architectural form, internally as well as externally. Noyes helped both in the planning and in the actual construction, and while sociologists might question the extent to which physical structure influences social organization, the Mansion House would seem to be a case in point.

Although each adult had a small room of his own, the building was designed to encourage a feeling of togetherness, hence the inclusion of a communal dining hall, recreation rooms, library, concert hall, outdoor picnic area, etc. It was in the Big Hall of the Mansion House that John Humphrey Noyes gave most of his widely-quoted home talks. It was here that musical concerts, dramas, readings, dances, and other forms of socializing were held. Community members were interested in the arts, and were able to organize such activities as symphony concerts, glee club recitals, and Shakespearian plays, even though practically all the talent was home grown. Occasionally, outside artists were invited, but on a day-to-day basis the Community was more or less a closed group, with members seldom straying very far from home base. What might be called their reference behavior related entirely to the group. The outside community was, figuratively and literally, "outside," and was always referred to as the 'The World.' It was this system of *integral closure*, sustained over several decades, which served as a primary solidifying force.

Standard reference works make much of economic and sexual communism as being the definitive features of the Oneida Community. As adduced from both interview and documentary materials, however, it would seem that the *communality of action* and the utilization of integral closure were, from a sociological view, paramount. And, of course, it was the Mansion House itself which served as the structural base for practically all Community activity. Insofar as the Perfectionists were concerned, the totality of their existence lay within the walls of the Mansion House. The building was designed to encompass and facilitate this totality pattern, and from all accounts it served its purpose well.

Most of those interviewed were unable to

separate the Old Community from the Mansion House. In their minds the two had become one, a fusion of the social and the structural, which, again, underscores the pervasiveness of the physical setting. Even today the building serves as a kind of community center. Most of the surviving members live there, and a good many of the direct descendants live within a block or two; in fact, as the descendants themselves age, they are likely to move into the Mansion House to spend their remaining years. In the words of one of the informants:

We all love the old place. Many of our folks lived there, and most of us played there as kids. We know the building down to the last brick and board. It's odd, so many of the people who move away seem to come back when they get older and live in the Mansion House. It's because they had such good times and such happy memories.

It should not be thought that life in the old Community was a continual round of entertainment. The Oneidans built their own home, raised their own food, made all their own clothes (including shoes!), did their own laundry, ran their own school, and performed countless other collective tasks. The performance of these necessary communal chores apparently served as a basic part of the conglomeration process. To be more specific, one of the interviewees stated that:

As children we loved to visit the various departments they used to have: the laundry, the kitchen, the fruit cellar, the bakery, the dairy, the dining room, the ice house, the tailor shop—they even had a Turkish Bath in the basement. The thing is that small groups of people worked side by side in most of these places, and they were able to talk with each other as they worked. Many of the jobs—in the kitchen and bakery, for example—were rotated. It's hard to explain, but my mother used to tell me that no matter how menial the job was, they were so busy talking to each other that the time always flew. It was this sort of thing, year after year, that gave rise to a kindred spirit.

Again, from a "family" perspective, it was this *functional partitioning*—the execution of economic tasks through primary group involvement—which helped to explain the success of the Oneida Community. Virtually all of their activities were designed to accentuate the *we* rather than the *I*, and the economic sphere was no exception. Special abilities were recognized; indeed, wherever possible, occupational assignments were made on the basis of individual aptitudes. But at one time or another most of

the work had to be rotated or shared, and so it was with Community life in general. The roles of the members were made crystal clear, and whether the activity in question was social, economic, sexual, or spiritual, the Oneida Perfectionists invariably turned against the *culte du moi* in favor of what to them was a selfless collectivism.

Human nature being what it is, of course, there were inevitable lapses on the part of certain members. Role conflicts sometimes did occur, and it was to counteract any tendency toward selfishness or ego-involvement that the much-publicized system of Mutual Criticism was inaugurated. Although details varied over the years, the general system involved a member who evidenced signs of personal aggrandizement being brought before a committee of peers who, frankly and objectively, attempted to pinpoint his social malfasance. None of the persons talked with had undergone Mutual Criticism inasmuch as they were too young at the time. (Children were not included in this part of the Oneida program.) From all reports, however, the system of Mutual Criticism was well received. None of those interviewed could recall hearing of any adverse comments; in fact, it appears that as the membership increased, the system came to be applied not only to deviants but to any one who was seriously desirous of self-improvement. The following three comments¹ appeared during 1871-1872 in the *Oneida Circular*, the Community's weekly newspaper:

I feel as though I had been washed; felt clean through the advice and criticism given. I would call the truth the soap; the critics the scrubbers; Christ's spirit the water.

Criticism is administered in faithfulness and love without respect to persons. I look upon the criticisms I have received since I came here as the greatest blessings that have been conferred upon me.

However painful, we have seen it yielding the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them who have been exercised thereby—I am confident, moreover, that instead of producing enmity and grudging, the criticisms that have been performed have increased the love and confidence of the members toward each other.

Although children were not subjected to Mutual Criticism, the meaning of group primacy was impressed upon them in a variety of ways. For instance, an episode was reported as occurring around 1850 involving all the girl children. Prior to this time there had been

¹ Harriet M. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, Kenwood, Oneida, N.Y.: privately printed, 1950, pp. 15-16.

several large dolls which, like all material things in the Community, were shared. Some kind soul thought it would be helpful if each of the girls had a doll of her own, and this policy was put into effect. However, it developed that the youngsters began to spend too much time with their dolls, and not enough on household chores, Bible reading, and Community matters in general. Accordingly, on a specified occasion, all the girls joined hands in a circle around the stove, and one by one were persuaded to throw their dolls into the fire. For the rest of the Community's existence, dolls were never allowed in the nursery.

Adults, too, were subject to self-imposed deprivations whenever they felt the group welfare threatened, and by present-day standards "group welfare" was given a most liberal interpretation. Several of the informants, for example, mentioned dietary and other restrictions that were adopted over the years. Although the Perfectionists ate well, meat was served sparingly, pork not at all. Lard was not used for shortening. Alcoholic beverages were prohibited, as were tea and coffee. Smoking also came to be taboo. The reasoning behind these prohibitions is not always clear, but presumably the Oneidans were dead set against *informal distractions* of an "anti-family" nature. Thus, dancing and card playing were permitted, since they were regarded as social activities, while coffee-drinking and smoking were condemned on the ground that they were individualistic and appetitive in nature. One of the interviewees made the following points:

I imagine the prohibitions were pretty well thought out. They didn't just spring up, but developed gradually. I know there were some differences of opinion, but the main thing was that certain practices were felt to be bad for group living. They believed that coffee-drinking was habit-forming, and that people looked forward to it too much—and this would somehow weaken Community ties. Remember, they were trying to create a spiritual and social brotherhood, and they spent much more time in the art of developing relationships than we do. They had to. After all, hundreds of them were living together as a family, and they worked at it day after day. They were successful, too, for they held together for almost two generations without a major quarrel.

The followers of John Humphrey Noyes were hard-working, well-behaved citizens, among whom crime and delinquency were virtually unknown. Because of this, they were generally respected by the surrounding com-

munity and by most every one else who came into actual contact with them. Nevertheless, the Oneidans were different. They knew it and The World knew it: in fact, this *secular differentiation* reinforced what I have called their system of integral closure and thereby served as another binding factor in the interest of group solidarity. By way of illustration, the Oneida women wore a very distinctive attire: in a period of floor-length skirts the Perfectionist ladies wore short ones (knee length) with loose trousers or "pantalettes" down to the shoes. I was shown some of the original dresses, and my impression was that they would create quite a stir even today. How must they have been viewed by outsiders 100 years ago! Moreover, all the Oneida women bobbed their hair, a custom which the Community instituted in 1848—and which was not introduced into The World until 1922 (by dancer Irene Castle). At any rate, it is easy to see why secular differentiation of this kind strengthened group identity. The following comment is illustrative:

Your asking of sociological questions about what held the Community together reminds me of something my aunt used to tell. The old Oneidans kept pretty much to themselves, but during the summer months they would sometimes permit visitors. Some Sunday afternoons whole trainloads of visitors would come. They were served picnic-style on the lawn of the Mansion House. I think they were charged \$1.00 for the whole thing. Of course, the visitors couldn't get over the way the Oneida women dressed, and they kept staring. My aunt always felt that the way outsiders always looked at them and talked about them had a great deal to do with their feelings of closeness.

Another measure which apparently helped to integrate Community membership was their widely-publicized system of economic communism. Personal ownership of wealth and private property of any kind were taboo, down to and including children's toys. Several of the informants mentioned the fact that in the early days of the Community the Oneidans had rough going; in fact, around 1850 their agricultural economy was in such poor shape that it was necessary for them to sell their watches in order to make ends meet. Fortunately, one of their members developed a steel trap, the manufacture of which involved a secret process of spring tempering. Demand for the traps proved great, and before long it was commonplace for the entire Community to turn out in order to meet the deadline for a large order.

From 1855 on, the Oneidans were without

financial worry; in fact, when they broke up around 1880, the treasury showed a balance of some \$600,000, no small sum for the period in question. (It was this money which was used to form a joint stock company, which organization today is known as Oneida, Ltd., Silver-smiths.) But whether the Community was struggling for survival, as it was during the early period, or whether it was able to reap a financial harvest, as it was during later years, available evidence suggests that collectivistic endeavors, coupled as they were with the other measures described herein, tended to strengthen intra-community bonds.

A final force which served to unite the Perfectionists was their religion and their spiritual devoutness; indeed, it would not be far from the mark to say that the Oneida Community was basically a religious organization. Their social, economic, and sexual beliefs all stemmed from the conviction that they were following God's word as expounded by John Humphrey Noyes. Following the so-called preterist position, Noyes preached that Christ had already returned to earth and that redemption or liberation from sin was an accomplished fact. It followed, therefore, that the spiritual world was autonomous, free, and quite independent of the temporal order. From this perspective, it is easy to see why Noyes was often antagonistic to temporal or "external" law. The essence of his religious teachings, incidentally, can be found in *The Berean*, a lengthy volume which has been called the Bible of the Oneida Community. Contents of *The Berean* range from the semi-mystical to the philosophically profound, but in many areas the teachings are heretical, especially when seen in the light of mid-nineteenth-century religionism.

Because of heresy, Noyes' license to preach had been revoked earlier in Vermont, but following revocation the scope and dogmatic intensity of his preachings increased. Nevertheless, his Oneida followers continued to believe passionately in his religious pronouncements, and any attempt to understand the conjoint nature of the group must take this factor into account. One informant, who had been born into the Community, put it in these words:

Their religion was different and they were well aware of it. They were also a very devout group. The combination of difference and devoutness made them feel close to one another. Today, you go to church on Sunday, but it doesn't make you feel any closer to the rest of the congregation. Things were different in the Community. Religion brought them together. It wasn't

just on Sunday, either—it was part of their everyday living. As a result, the atmosphere was much more spiritual than anything you'd find today, outside of the religious orders.

What was the net result of all of the above measures? From what was said, it appears that the Oneidans were able to maintain a remarkably cohesive form of family and social organization. Conformity was maintained through a patterned series of social controls which, contrary to the usual system of imposition, actually emanated from *within* the membership. As a result, normative interaction was stable enough, over the years, to debar the cliquishness and factionalism which seem to characterize so many of the smaller religious bodies. Those interviewed were nearly unanimous in their belief that the old Oneida Community was an effectively organized, well integrated, and happy group. The following three comments speak for themselves:

I was a child in the old Community, and I can tell you that they were a happy group. They used to meet nightly in the Big Hall to socialize, discuss problems, etc. The outside world had their get-togethers on Saturday night. We had ours every night, and it was something to look forward to. Of course, I was only a child at the time—they disbanded before I was 10—and children like to glorify their childhood. Still, when anybody asks me about the old days, my dominant memory is one of contentment and happiness.

I was too young to remember much. But as I grew older and asked my relatives about the Community days, their faces would light up. My own folks were "come outers"; that is, they thought the thing had gone on long enough and weren't too sorry when the group broke up. But even they loved to talk about the "old days" and how much they missed them. They were wonderful people and they had wonderful times.

I was not born in the old Community, although many of my relatives were. But from the way they all talked about life in the Mansion House, they were living life to the fullest. They were able to combine the spiritual, the economic, and the social, and make it really work. At the very end there was some bitterness—about who should take over the leadership—but that's another part of the story.

Sexual Practices

Although their family and social organization were unique, it was the Community's bizarre sexual system which attracted national and international attention. Just as Mormonism is invariably linked with polygyny, so the Oneida Community seems destined to be associated with group marriage. John Humphrey Noyes be-

lieved neither in romantic love nor in monogamous marriage, such manifestations being considered selfish and smacking of possessiveness. He taught that all men should love all women and that all women should love all men, and while no attempt was made to impose this reciprocity on The World, group marriage (or "Complex Marriage," as it was called) continued throughout the whole of the Community's existence.

Sex relations within the group were reportedly easy to arrange inasmuch as the men and women all lived in the Mansion House. If a man desired sexual intercourse with a particular woman, he was supposed to make his wish known to a Central Committee, who would convey his desire to the woman in question. If the latter consented, the man would go to her room at bedtime and spend an hour or so with her before returning to his own room. No woman was forced to submit to a sexual relationship which was distasteful to her, and the committee system presumably afforded her a tactful method for turning down unwelcome suitors. It was understood by all concerned that their sexual latitude did not carry with it the rights of parenthood. Only the select were permitted to have children, a point which will be discussed later.

The above facts relating to the sex practices of the Oneidans are those generally contained in texts and encyclopedic references. Many of the really significant sexual questions, however, have never been raised, let alone answered. To what extent did the women refuse sexual requests? Did men and women tend to form more-or-less permanent pairs or was there, in fact, a system of group marriage? Did women initiate sexual requests or, as in The World, was it the men who invariably took the initiative? Was the committee system really used by the Oneida males, or was this merely a formality which was easily by-passed? Did not the women of the Community have difficulty in adjusting, sexually, to a large number of different partners? Was not the factor of male jealousy a problem? And so on. In brief, group marriage is such a rare phenomenon on this earth that ethnographers have sometimes questioned its very existence. Apparently this system of matrimony has too many inherent disadvantages to prevail as a dominant societal form. Contravening a wealth of historical and cross-cultural evidence, therefore, how were the Oneidans able to adjust to group marriage so successfully over a relatively long period? Or

were there problems that simply never came to light? One of those interviewed made the following remarks:

I grant the questions are of interest to family scholars, but look at it from our view. If somebody came to you and asked questions concerning the sex life of your parents and grandparents, you'd have a tough time answering. The same with us. When the old Community broke up, there was a natural reluctance to discuss sex. Former members didn't discuss their own sex lives, and naturally their children and grandchildren didn't pry. I often wish the old people had had a regular system of marriage. Then we wouldn't have had such bad publicity—most of it incorrect or misleading. If it weren't for the sex part, the Oneida Community might have been forgotten long ago.

One of the company officers supplied the following interesting, if sad, information. During the decades of the Community's existence, many of the Oneidians were in the habit of keeping diaries. (Diary-keeping was evidently much more common in the 19th century than it is today.) Some of the Perfectionists also accumulated bundles of personal letters. After the Community broke up, and as the members died over the years, the question arose as to what to do with all these documents. Since so much of the material was of a personal and sexual nature, since names were named, and inasmuch as the children and the grandchildren of these "names" were still living, it was decided to store all the old diaries, letters, and other personal documents in the vaults of Oneida, Ltd. A few years ago a company officer—who happened to be one of the informants—received permission to examine the material in order to see what should be done with it:

I went through some of the stuff—old diaries and things—and a lot of it was awfully personal. Names and specific happenings were mentioned—that kind of thing. Anyway, I reported these facts to the company, and it was decided that in view of the nature of the material, it should all be destroyed. So one morning we got a truck—and believe me, there was so much stuff we needed a truck—loaded all the material on and took it out to the dump and burned it. We felt that divulging the contents wouldn't have done ourselves or anybody else any good.

Thus went a veritable gold mine of pertinent information! There can be no doubt that the burned material would have shed much light on the sexual patterns of the Oneida Perfectionists. As it is, to reconstruct the operative function-

ings of group marriage would be a most formidable task; indeed, substantive answers to many of the sex questions may never be found. From the company's viewpoint, of course, the destruction of the above-mentioned documents was understandable. Oneida, Ltd. is not in business to further the cause of socio-historical research, and irrespective of how much the material may have benefited sociologists, there was always the possibility that the contents might have proved embarrassing to the company or to some of the direct descendants.

This diary-burning episode has been mentioned in some detail not only to bring the historico-cultural picture up to date but to point out why it is that for all the uniqueness of their system, next to nothing is known of the actual sex practices of the Perfectionists. The present study may shed a little light on the subject, but it should be kept in mind that like most other Americans of the period, the old Oneidians did not openly discuss sexual matters, so that the children and grandchildren interviewed were probably less informed on this subject than on any of the others that were discussed.

One of the questions asked was whether the factor of male jealousy did not make itself felt. The answer appears to be in the negative. As one of the interviewees put it:

I don't think it was much of a problem. Certainly the old folks, when they talked about the Community, never made any issue of it. Their religious teachings emphasized spiritual equality, and their whole way of life was aimed at stamping out feelings of envy and jealousy. Also, with so many women to choose from, why would a man experience feelings of jealousy? Once in a while a man and woman would be suspected of falling in love—"special love" they called it—but it happened infrequently. When it did, the couple were separated. One would be sent to Wallingford, Connecticut—we had a small Community branch there for a while.

Although respondents were agreed that the men readily adjusted to a plurality of women partners, they were generally silent on the question of how the Oneida females adjusted to a variety of male partners. It is unfortunate that so little information was available on this point, for this issue—in my opinion, at least—is a crucial one. In effect, the Oneida women were encouraged to have sex relations with a variety of men, but were not supposed to become emotionally involved with any of the men with whom they were having these relations! The American woman of today tends to emotionalize

and romanticize her sexual experience, and it would be hard for her to have any empathetic understanding of the Oneida system, wherein neither romance nor monogamous love were supposed to play any part in the sex act. As for the Oneida women, themselves, one can but conjecture. If they were indeed gratified by sexual variety, all human experience would be in for a contradiction. And yet—given the prevailing social system and their religious orientation—who is to say just what feminine feelings really were. In the absence of the diary material, it is problematical whether this question will ever be fully answered.

One thin clue was the belief by four of the interviewees that at least in terms of overt behavior the female refusal rate was not high. The company officer who had examined a small portion of the material-to-be-burned reported that there was nothing therein to indicate that female refusal was a problem. Another male respondent stated that he had been informed by an old Community member that the latter "had never been refused." Two female interviewees had been told by an older woman member that the refusal rate was probably low. Most of the informants, however, had no specific information to offer, and evidence on this point seems likely to remain fragmentary.

The question whether the Oneida women ever took the initiative in requesting sexual relations drew a generally negative response. Several interviewees reported that they knew of some coquetry on the part of certain women, but that they had never heard of anything more direct. Two of the older female respondents stated that there was one known case where a woman went to a man and asked to have a child by him. In this instance, however, the implication is not clear, inasmuch as the Perfectionists differentiated sharply between sex for procreation and sex for recreation. All reports considered, it seems doubtful whether Oneida females were any more disposed to assume the role of active partner than were females in society at large.

That the Perfectionists institutionalized sexual freedom is a matter of record; in fact, the term "free love" appears to have been coined by the Oneidans around 1850. At the same time, certain sexual rules—some written, some unwritten—were developed, and consensus was strong enough to effect optimal conformity. Oneidans were enjoined to act like ladies and gentlemen at all times. Coarse behavior, vulgar or suggestive language, overt displays of sexuality—such

behaviorisms were not tolerated. As a matter of fact, the evidence available suggests that sexual activity was not openly discussed within the Community, and it is doubtful whether the subject of "Who was having relations with whom?" ever became common knowledge. It was said, for instance, that one male member who became too inquisitive on this score was literally thrown out of the Community, an act which represented the only expulsion in the group's history.

The extent to which the committee system was utilized is not clear. Officially, male members were supposed to get permission from the Central Committee, or at least from the Chairman of the Committee (usually an older woman), before having sexual relations with a given female, but several of the persons interviewed had reservations on this point. The most pointed response was the following:

Well, I've thought about the committee business, and I've talked with some of the old folks about it. I'm inclined to think it was kind of a formality that declined with the passage of time. Perhaps in the beginning it was adhered to. Also, it may have been that the first time a man and a woman had relations a go-between was consulted, but I doubt whether further relations called for any formal permission. Of course, in order to have children, committee approval was needed, but from the strictly sexual view I think it was considered pretty much private business.

The Eugenics Program. A vital component of the Oneida sexual system was the eugenics program, usually referred to as Stirpiculture. Noyes had been impressed with the writings of Darwin and Galton, and from the very beginning had decided that the Community should follow the principles of scientific propagation. Accordingly, he requested the Perfectionists to refrain from having children until such time as adequate financial resources were built up, and published accounts make much of the fact that during the 20 years it took to achieve economic self-sufficiency the Oneidans were successful in their efforts at fertility control. The type birth control used was *coitus reservatus*, sexual intercourse up to but not including ejaculation. Male orgasm was permissible only with women who had passed menopause; in fact, it was with this group of females that the younger men were supposed to learn the necessary ejaculatory control. After the twenty-year period, 53 women and 38 men were chosen to be parents, or stirps, and the eugenics program was officially inaugurated. During the ensuing ten years, 58

children were born into the Community, after which period the Perfectionists disbanded.

So much for the published accounts. From the information which could be pieced together, these accounts are somewhat inaccurate. To begin with, some children *were* born into the Community prior to 1869, the year the eugenics program was started. The technique of *coitus reservatus*, therefore, was not 100 per cent effective, though in view of its rather bizarre nature it seems to have worked reasonably well.*

It should also be pointed out that several children were born after the eugenics program had started who were *not* the offspring of stirps. Understandably, a number of the women who had failed to be chosen as prospective parents were still desirous of having babies, and a few reportedly did their utmost to achieve motherhood. Mentioned, for instance, was a passage in one of the burned diaries in which a man, referring to his sexual activities with a particular woman, make the remark, "She tried to make me lose control." In spite of some marked exceptions, however, those who were not chosen as stirps seem to have accepted their lot without question.

The actual criteria and methods for selecting the stirps have never been revealed. It is known that committees were set up to make the selection, but what standards they used is something of a mystery. Noyes served on the committees, and it would seem that it was he who largely decided which of the Perfectionists were qualified for parenthood. It was said that Noyes, himself, fathered a dozen children, so that evidently he was not adverse to self-selection.

Whatever the criteria used, and whatever the relative contributions of heredity and environment, the Stirpiculture program was apparently a success. As a group, the children born of

* It should be mentioned that in the minds of the Perfectionists the system was by no means bizarre. *Coitus Reservatus* was looked upon not only as an effective method of birth control but as a means of *emotionally elevating* sexual pleasure. Interestingly enough, in Aldous Huxley's recent best-selling *Island* (N.Y., Harper, 1962), *coitus reservatus* is the method used by the Utopian society of Pala: "Did you ever hear of the Oneida Community?" Ranga now asked. "Basically, *maithuna* is the same as what the Oneida people called *coitus reservatus*. . . . But birth control is only the beginning of the story. *Maithuna* is something else. Something even more important. "Remember," he went on earnestly, "the point that Freud was always harping on . . . the point about the sexuality of children. What we're born with, what we experience all through infancy and childhood, is a sexuality that isn't concentrated on the genitals; it's a sexuality diffused throughout the whole organism. That's the paradise we inherit. But the paradise gets lost as the child grows up. *Maithuna* is the organized attempt to regain that paradise." (pp. 86-87)

selected parents led a healthy and vigorous life. Their death rate was reportedly lower than that of the surrounding community²; in fact, as mentioned earlier, thirteen of the Stirpiculture children are still living, a figure substantially greater than actuarial expectancy. Interviews revealed that a number of the children had achieved eminence in the business and professional world, several had written books, and nearly all had in turn borne children who were a credit to the community.

It might be well at this point to clear up a misconception relative to the child-rearing program of the Community. It is true that the children were not raised by their parents. Infants were under the care of their mothers up to the age of 15 months, but thereafter were moved to the children's section of the Mansion House. And while the youngsters were treated with kindness by their parents, the Community made a conscious effort to play down feelings of sentimentality between parents and offspring, the feeling being that Perfectionists should treat all children as their own, and vice versa.

It is not true, however, that the child rearing system was one of impersonality. Children were shown ample affection and kindness, and they apparently enjoyed the zest of group living; at least, all those interviewed felt certain that childhood in the Old Community was a happy and exhilarating experience. As one of the "children" put it:

Well, I remember one little girl always wanted her mother. She'd stand outside her window and call to her, even though the mother wasn't supposed to answer. Other than that particular case, all the children seemed happy enough. Everybody was good to us. You know you were loved because it was like a big family. Also, there were so many activities for the youngsters, so many things to do, well—believe me—we were happy children. Everybody around here will give you the same answer on that!

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the Oneida eugenics system is why there were so few children born. The stirpiculture program ran for a little over 10 years, and all-told nearly 100 men and women were involved. In view of the relatively high birth rate which prevailed in the U.S. during the 1870's, the fact that these chosen Oneidans produced but 58 children is most difficult to understand. The method of *coitus reservatus*, practiced by the Oneida males

² H. H. and G. W. Noyes, "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture," *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family*, 1 (1932), pp. 374-386.

for so many years, may have had an unaccountable effect on fertility, though this would seem a far-fetched explanation. It is possible that the answer lies in the method of stirp selection. It was said that at least two different committees were involved, and there may have been some internal disagreement. It is also possible that there was some sexual incompatibility between certain of the male and female stirps, though this is pure conjecture. In any event, the low birth rate among the Perfectionists is surprising in view of the apparent success of the program.

JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES: CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

From his writings and information provided by people who knew him, John Humphrey Noyes was undoubtedly a very remarkable man and a charismatic leader of the first order. In fact, he was much more than an extraordinary leader. He was the indispensable man. His followers were a hard-working, devout group, among whom there were any number of intelligent and able men and women. But in the last analysis they were—followers. Throughout the many decades of Perfectionist existence, no effective leadership ever emerged other than that of Father Noyes. The ultimate outcome, of course, was predictable: when Noyes resigned, the Community fell apart, torn by internal dissension. It was as though the group had been formed in his image, and as the image faded, the group faded right along with it.

The charismatic qualities of John Humphrey Noyes were in evidence from the very beginning of his career. During the 1830's at Putney, Vermont, he was able to attract followers on the basis of his visionary talents and the strength of his personality—no mean feat when his didactic radicalism is viewed against the backdrop of traditional New England morality. In the 1840's Noyes renounced orthodox medical treatment and declared that for Perfectionists the only true physician was Christ. It was during this period that he allegedly cured a woman who was both crippled and blind.

Whatever the importance of his so-called divine powers, Noyes continued to attract followers through the originality of his thought and his sense of religious dedication, traits which become evident when one examines his social and theological pronouncements. In this connection, he was nothing short of a voluminous writer. In addition to turning out scores of articles and monographs dealing with theology, he was a guiding hand for such publications as

The Witness, The Free Church Circular, The Spiritual Magazine, The American Socialist, The Perfectionist, and The Oneida Circular. One would think that his writings were sufficiently diverse and thought-provoking to have kept historians, theologians, and sociologists busy for many a day, but for some reason his works have come in for little scholarly examination, either of an exegetic or sociological nature.

Although Noyes could count both women and men among his disciples, there is no denying the fact that Oneida womenfolk were strongly attracted to him. It may be that as head of the "family" he presented a strong father image; or it may have been a natural attraction that the platform figure has for so many females; but whatever the reason, the women of the Community paid him undying homage. Those so chosen felt honored to have children by him. Others, it was said, learned shorthand in order that none of his utterances would be lost to posterity. And on his part, Noyes saw to it that the women were accorded not only spiritual but functional equality, as the following remark indicates:

One thing that most people have overlooked is that Father Noyes delegated a lot more responsibility to the women here than they ever would have received on the outside. Every committee had women on it. It made a difference, too. All the old folks will tell you it made both men and women respect each other.

Like so many charismatic leaders, Noyes had a well of energy which ran far deeper than that of other men. He helped design and build the Mansion House, he performed physical labor in the trap shop, he headed committees, he wrote continually, he travelled widely, and he served as both legislative and judicial head of the Oneidans. It should perhaps be mentioned that his countless organizational duties had no appreciable effect on his sexual prowess. While few details of his sex life have ever been revealed despite the fact that he was the engineer of Complex Marriage, it is common knowledge among the present Oneidans that Noyes fathered a dozen children while he was in his sixties.

In 1877 he resigned, and in 1879 John Humphrey Noyes left for Canada, never to return. The reasons for his leaving have never been made entirely clear. It is true that his health was not good. His voice had failed and he had become increasingly deaf. Also, following his resignation, social organization within the Community had become carious. It seems more probable, however, that the immediate

cause of his departure was the fear that he would be charged by the District Attorney's office with committing statutory sex offenses. Actually, the District Attorney never made any legal charges, but had he done so he might have obtained a conviction.

Under the system of Complex Marriage, there was apparently no restriction based on the age factor. It seems likely that some of the Oneida men had been having sex relations with girls who were under the statutory age as defined by New York law. It is also a reasonable certainty that Noyes was one of the men; at least, so several of the informants claimed. Presumably wishing to avoid prosecution and scandal, therefore, he fled to Canada.

Care should be taken, however, not to misinterpret this aspect of his career. Oneida women of all ages revered Father Noyes, and he in turn accorded them full partnership in the Community. When it came to the presumed initiation of younger girls into the sexual rites, Noyes and other senior male members were simply carrying out a stated principle of the Community—in this instance, the principle of *Ascending Fellowship*. Quoting from the *Oneida Handbook*, published by the Community in 1875:

Oneidans entirely reject the idea that love is an inevitable and uncontrollable fatality, which must have its own course. They believe the whole matter of love and its expression should be subject to enlightened self-control, and should be managed for the greatest good. In the Community it is under the special supervision of the fathers and mothers, who are guided in their management by certain general principles, which have been worked out and are well understood in the Community. One is termed the principle of the *Ascending Fellowship*. It is regarded as better, in the early stages of passion, for the young of both sexes to associate in love with persons older than themselves, and if possible with those who are spiritual and have been some time in the school of self-control, and who are thus able to make love safe and edifying. This is only another form of the popular principle of contrasts. It is well understood by physiologists that it is undesirable for persons of similar characters and temperaments to mate together. Communists have discovered that it is undesirable for two inexperienced and unspiritual persons to rush into fellowship with each other; that it is far better for both to associate with persons of mature character and sound sense.³

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that

³ *Hand-Book of the Oneida Community*, Oneida, N.Y.: Office of *Oneida Circular*, p. 39.

Noyes was an extremely pious man, and in the sexual sphere he was probably convinced that he was fulfilling God's word. And if His word conflicted with man-made law, the latter would have to be disregarded. In this, Noyes was guilty of an error in judgment. A few of those interviewed feel that the error was serious enough to be considered a defect of character. Unfortunately, not enough of the details are known to permit a final verdict.

My own feeling is that Noyes' sexual proclivities played an important part in the total makeup of the man. He had tremendous vigor, a vigor which manifested itself in the spiritual, the mental—and the physical. It can be no coincidence that his Utopian Community included relative freedom of sex expression. Yet to believe that Noyes' life was dominated by sex, in the narrow sense, would be to misunderstand both his nature and the nature of the Oneida Community. John Humphrey Noyes was dominated in life by nothing other than his religious zeal. This factor, taken in conjunction with his wide range of talents and his unflagging energy, leads one to the conclusion that he was, to a remarkable degree, a "most compleat man." In parallel fashion, the Community he founded aimed at being a spiritual and social organization complete in itself—a so-called society within a society.

Perhaps the most illuminating statement about John Humphrey Noyes was the following, made by a woman whose mother had known the Perfectionist leader quite well:

I've often wondered about the traits that made him what he was. I just don't know. You might have got an answer 100 years ago. Now, maybe it's too late. I remember asking my mother the same question when I was a young girl. "Why did you live that way? What was there about him?" and I remember her saying, "Don't ask me to explain it. I can't. All I know is that when you were in his presence you knew you were with some one who was not an ordinary man."

Father Noyes died in 1886, though to the very end he retained an active interest in his former flock and in the silverware business, which was then in a period of transition. I was informed that through 1885 he continued to select the bulk of Oneida, Ltd.'s Board of Directors. Thus from the beginning to the end—through all the strife, happiness, and disillusion which formed the sequence of his life—he remained a man seemingly destined to have an irresistible effect upon the lives of other men.

Concluding Remarks

The family field is immeasurably stronger than it was at the close of World War II. The number of substantive areas has increased. Sampling and statistical research have reached new levels of sophistication. Cross-cultural comparisons of family behavior continue unabated. It is somewhat strange, therefore, that the area of historico-cultural research has been by-passed. We do not have graduate students actively working in this area, and neither our textbooks nor our journals give the matter much more than passing reference. I contend that this lack of interest in the socio-historical realm is deleterious to all concerned. Graduate students who have genuine aptitude in this sphere are likely to turn elsewhere for their doctoral work. And in terms of the presumptive and associative inferences which can be drawn from such research, failure to investigate must invariably give rise to blind spots within the domain of family behavior.

As an example of historico-cultural investigation I have attempted to analyze an experimental

form of family organization. Other forms are available for parallel study: celibate groups such as the Father Divine Movement and the Shakers; polygynist groups such as the Mormon Fundamentalists (who continue their practice of plural marriage in spite of severe legal obstacles). Still other groups with unique forms of family or social organization would include the Amana Society, the Black Jews, the Hutterites, the House of David, the Llano Colonies, and the Old Order Amish.

To the best of my knowledge, the present account of the Oneida Community is the first ever to appear in any family journal. Most of the other groups mentioned above have yet to make such an appearance. It would seem, certainly, that they are over-due. Students of the family have made effective use of cross-cultural data, both for teaching purposes and for typologies in theory building. I submit that modern historico-cultural research—as focused, for example, on unique forms of family organization such as those mentioned above—would be similarly effective.

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